

## Yourcenar, Sartre and the Limits of Authenticity: Re-reading *Mémoires d'Hadrien* from an Existentialist Perspective

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Marguerite Yourcenar has always been perceived as an outsider to the literary and intellectual scene of her time. Even at the height of her fame, in 1970, Maurice Nadeau wrote: “Sans doute, Marguerite Yourcenar prend-elle malaisément place dans le grand courant qui, après la guerre, porte les romanciers français vers de nouvelles terres, à l’aide de nouvelles méthodes d’approche” (Nadeau 57). Ten years later, in 1980, the distinction of becoming the first *académicienne* failed to trigger a critical reassessment of Yourcenar’s persona and work. As recently as 2014, in an article in *Le Magazine Littéraire*, in the context of a dossier dedicated to Yourcenar, Bruno Blanckeman confirmed that “elle reste hermétique aux avant-gardes de son siècle” (Blanckeman 93). Perhaps paradoxically, the author encouraged this perception of her work by distancing herself from her contemporary intellectual currents on several occasions. For example, in a 1987 interview, a few months before she died, she was asked whether she had “des contacts avec les existentialistes, par exemple Sartre, Camus, Blanchot, ceux qui ont donné le ton [...] à la culture d’après-guerre en France”. Yourcenar replied as follows: “Pas énormément, parce que je trouve toute cette littérature beaucoup trop intellectualiste, beaucoup trop dialectique; et dans un moment où il serait si important de voir de près et de s’intéresser à la réalité des choses, elle tourne le dos aux choses” (Yourcenar, *Portrait d’une voix* 366). This is a fascinating statement in that it weaves together issues of historical urgency (in the aftermath of the War) with philosophical questions (such as the need to turn to the things themselves), while simultaneously making a case against literary abstraction in post-War French literature. This article will argue that, for all their dismissive character, statements such as this should not be construed as signs of insularity, but as expressions of Yourcenar’s informed engagement with the theoretical debates of her time. As a case in point, in what follows, I will identify the presence of an existentialist thread in Yourcenar’s magnum opus, *Mémoires d’Hadrien* (1951), and I will analyze it with selective reference to Jean-Paul Sartre’s fiction and philosophy of that time. I will propose that Yourcenar employs existentialist notions that enjoyed wide currency at the time, such as authenticity and freedom, in order to test (and ultimately confirm) the resilience of the classical humanist tradition after the Second World War. In the last part of this article, I will address some of the criticisms concerning her putative reluctance to confront humanism’s aporias and the ethical ambiguities to which the humanist tradition gave rise.

In an interview published in 1972, Yourcenar sweepingly dismissed existentialism, Marxism and structuralism as “idéologies [qui] durcissent le passé” (Rosbo 56). Her point was that abstract thinking, fashionable as it was in French intellectual circles, failed to do justice to the complexity of history and lived experience. Already in 1951, in a letter to Constantin Dimaras, her co-translator of Greek poet Cavafy, she was keen to dissociate *Mémoires d’Hadrien* – then in the course of becoming a literary success – from what she called “[l]es systèmes psychologiques en vogue,” namely, “[l]e démonisme mystique d’un Dostoïevski, [les] complexes freudiens, ou [...] l’existentialisme”. She added that these theories were infiltrated by a “notion chrétienne du péché [...] privée de [...] la notion du libre arbitre et celle de la Grâce”. To these theories, Yourcenar opposed her own neoclassical idea of a harmonious and serene humanity, “une image plus tranquille et plus égale de l’homme, sans rehauts, sans ombre portée” (Yourcenar, *D’Hadrien à Zénon* 37-38).

In the wake of the post-structural interrogation of all forms of totality and self-sufficiency, it is tempting to dismiss this idea of “l’homme” as a comforting metaphysical fantasy. Yourcenar seems to imagine this plenitude of existence as the normal state of being, to which any “highlights” or “shadows” are merely incidental. One could evoke here Jacques Derrida’s analysis of the supplement, which suggests that such secondary features do not constitute exceptions to “the norm”, but signs of that which is *not* normal in the desire for normality, of that which is not harmonious in the imaginary projection of the harmony of humankind.<sup>1</sup> Writing from a relevant perspective, Colin Davis traced instances of violent suppression of the Other in *Mémoires d’Hadrien* and associated them with ethical problems in Sartre’s and Heidegger’s respective accounts of humanism. For Davis, Sartre’s all-inclusive concept of humanism is reflected in Hadrien’s “quest for totalities without residue, for seamless wholes to contain the plurality of parts” (Davis 120). What is more, according to Davis, this project also betrays Yourcenar’s complicity with processes of exclusion at work in her narrative. Her portrayal of the Jews and of women in the novel constitute “blind spots” revealing Yourcenar’s “fantasy image of humanity as a consistent, harmonious whole” (130). Davis is right to argue that *Mémoires* is a novel about humanism and authenticity, a novel that raises ethical questions that are not properly resolved in the narrative. I will return to Davis’s criticism in the last part of this article.

Fair as they are, these criticisms should nonetheless be contextualized within Yourcenar’s broader thinking about the self, which is influenced by her readings of Nietzsche, Gide and Thomas Mann, among others. For example, as May Chehab has proposed, Yourcenar found in Nietzsche the idea of a multiple and fragmented self and even pushed beyond the humanist limits of this idea when she declared that the self was merely a “commodité grammaticale, philosophique and physiologique” (quoted in Chehab 264). This indicates a strong anti-essentialist vein in her thought which is related to her almost instinctive rejection of any attempt to theorize experience, and which also antagonizes her belief in an unalterable quality of being human. In this ontological tug-of-war between essence and contingency, totality and fragmentation, it is possible to discern a desire on the part of Yourcenar to save humanism from itself, to imagine a kind of selfhood that is internally coherent and consistent, while also being free from the metaphysical charge of conventional humanism. It is precisely this urge that affords the common ground for a comparative approach between Yourcenar and Sartre. Especially his concept of authenticity, seen here as a philosophical attempt to combine notions of purity and originality with the acknowledgement of contingency and individual agency, will provide an important critical angle for the discussion that follows.

At the time of the publication of *Mémoires d’Hadrien*, Sartre’s version of existentialism dominated the French scene. Yet, he was rarely mentioned in Yourcenar’s writings, while she was never mentioned in his, as far as we know. In Yourcenar’s essay on Thomas Mann, which she dates 1955-1956, she fleetingly refers to “cette assimilation du physiologique à l’immonde, constante chez un Sartre, implicite aussi chez un Genet” (“Humanisme et hermétisme” 169). Already in the mid-1950’s, Sartre seems to represent French literature’s tendency to abstraction. A similar criticism is expressed in Yourcenar’s preface to the 1971 edition of her play *Electre ou la chute des masques* (originally published in 1954). There, she refers to other theatrical versions of the myth of Electra, and has this to say about Sartre’s *Les Mouches*: “l’hiératisme du ton et une dialectique aride y réduisent singulièrement la part de l’humain. [...] [C]’est au concept même de Dieu que s’attaque chez Sartre un abstrait Oreste” (*Théâtre II* 17). In Sartre’s version of the myth, abstraction is associated with the “défaite de l’humain” (*ibid.*), which Yourcenar contrasts with her own conviction that there is a core of humanity in every individual.

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<sup>1</sup> Derrida, *De la grammatologie*.

Yet despite these criticisms, Yourcenar explicitly pointed to the existential dimension of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*. In an interview, she specified that, in her novel,

nous avons enfin un personnage dont je dirais que l'image que finalement nous obtenons de lui est existentielle et non essentielle, pour parler le jargon philosophique de notre temps (autant celui-là qu'un autre), c'est-à-dire que nous avons un individu unique comme nous tous, fait comme nous tous d'éléments fortuits assemblés un peu au hasard, et qu'il s'agit de retrouver dans leur complexité. (Rosbo 66)

Notwithstanding the ironic remark about the “jargon” of existentialism, Yourcenar utilizes a popular existentialist idiom to describe her protagonist. Hadrien is to be understood as a unique individual, experiencing contingency “comme nous tous”. Furthermore, Yourcenar indicates that the authenticity of her narrative is equally at stake as the “existential” authenticity of her hero. On the one hand, Hadrien must be captured by the author's imagination as irreducibly human; on the other, this irreducibility has to be justified through the way the protagonist's life is depicted in the novel. In the first and most meditative part of the book, the question that Hadrien asks is not whether his life has been authentic, but how to depict it in an authentic fashion.

Le paysage de mes jours semble se composer comme les régions de montagne, de matériaux divers entassés pêle-mêle. [...] Je m'efforce de *reparcourir* ma vie pour y trouver un plan, [...] mais *ce plan tout factice n'est qu'un trompe-l'œil du souvenir*. [...] Je perçois bien dans cette diversité, dans ce désordre, *la présence d'une personne*, mais sa forme semble presque toujours tracée par la pression des circonstances. (304-305, my emphasis)

Hadrien's malaise, however supra-historical, in the sense that it reflects perennial concerns, is nonetheless quite specific to the modern times in the way it interweaves existential with narrative inquiries. The problem of lived experience is that it is meaningless in itself unless it is given a narrative shape. The idea of authenticity is introduced negatively in terms of its absence: “ce plan tout factice,” “un trompe-l'œil du souvenir”. Lack suggests a longing for a narrative that is true to the actual experience of what Yourcenar, in the quotation above, describes as “cette diversité”, “ce désordre”, and “la pression des circonstances”. An authentic narrative, therefore, is a non-reductionist one that takes contingency into account.

In his book *On Being Authentic*, Charles Guignon examines precisely these interconnections between authenticity and the narratability of life. He points out that the belief that we “might constitute ourselves in imparting a narrative shape to our lives” entails certain risks including the sense of “contingency of life” and of “self-dissociation and alienation” (Guignon 143). Guignon continues:

A deep fissure or gap seems to open up in this experience of our condition, between the self that makes decisions about how the story is to go and the self that is located in the physical world and is exposed to the vicissitudes of life. This gap has been captured in an especially powerful way by Sartre. (143)

Guignon refers to Sartre's phenomenological analysis of perception and especially to the distinction between the transcendental self, which attributes meaning to things, and the factual self, which is determined by external meaning, more or less like an object in the world. In his early essay *La Transcendence de l'Ego* (1936), Sartre examines how, on the basis of this distinction, the self emerges. On the subject of introspection, he writes in a way that is very reminiscent of Hadrien's sense of alienation and inauthenticity:

[La] tentative de l'introspection se présente dès l'origine comme un effort pour *reconstituer avec des pièces détachées, avec des fragments isolés*, ce qui est

donné originellement d'un coup, d'un seul jet. Aussi l'intuition de l'Ego est-elle un mirage perpétuellement décevant, car, à la fois, elle livre tout et elle ne livre rien. (69, my emphasis)

There is a rapprochement between Sartre and Yourcenar in the way they perceive an existential line of inquiry that begins with self-examination, goes through the awareness of fragmentation and the longing for unity, and ends in deception. Yourcenar's "matériaux divers entassés pêle-mêle" resemble Sartre's "pièces détachées [...] fragments isolés". Yourcenar's narrative approach involves an act of "reparcourir", retracing one's life, while Sartre's analytical approach involves an act of "reconstituer". Both authors stress the inability to perceive a self: "l'Ego", for Sartre, "la présence d'une personne", for Yourcenar, while they both also find that these representations are misleading ("décevant", "factice", respectively).

For Sartre, who theorized on the problem of the self as representation more systematically, the self is not a substance that precedes and unifies consciousness, as it is for Kant, but a representation retrospectively based on individual engagements with the world (Sartre, *La Transcendance*, 13-26). For this reason, Sartre claims that the self cannot be established on the basis of our conscious sense of it, the intuition of the 'Ego'. The only measure of the reality of the self is individual action, as Sartre asserts in some of his best-known aphorisms: "il n'y a de réalité que dans l'action;" "l'homme [...] n'est donc rien d'autre que l'ensemble de ses actes" (*L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* 55). Yourcenar was undoubtedly familiar with these aphorisms and it is partly as a response to them that she raised, precisely in this context of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, the question of action as the measure of the value of the self. Hadrien states: "Je ne suis pas de ceux qui disent que leurs actions ne leur ressemblent pas. Il faut bien qu'elles le fassent, puisqu'elles sont ma seule mesure [...]" (305). Then he cautions as follows: "mais il y a entre moi et ces actes dont je suis fait un hiatus indéfinissable" (ibid.) Yourcenar seems to remind to her readers that Sartre's analytic of action is only partially correct. Then Hadrien adds: "Les trois quarts de ma vie échappent d'ailleurs à cette définition par les actes" (ibid.) While the self is responsible for its actions, it is at the same time located at a secret place that cannot be precisely established on the basis of these actions alone. What is happening here is typical of the essentialism/anti-essentialism dualism that Yourcenar both stages in her narrative and is keen to transcend. On the one hand, she confronts classical humanism with Sartre's existential anthropology and is willing to rid the former of some of the metaphysical burden associated with it, such as the belief in a human "essence". On the other hand, she is skeptical of Sartre's analytical process that has little to propose in terms of positive action (in a moment of despair, Hadrien says: "les philosophes [...] n'ont plus rien à nous dire", 306). In the end, her search for a new humanism will not come from philosophy but from literature. The literary narrative will provide the conditions for the possibility of authenticity to emerge.

Interweaving the question of narrative with that of life has been central in Yourcenar's work. In fact, life narratives have been at the heart of her writing from her early output *Pindare* (1932) until the end of her life. Her other major novels, *L'Œuvre au noir* (1968) and *Un Homme obscur* (1981) can be read as biographies of fictional characters in historical settings, while the three-volume opus *Le Labyrinthe du monde* (1974-1988) is also a biographical account of her family and ancestors. The importance attached by Yourcenar to life narratives – fictional or otherwise – suggests a conviction on her part that it is possible to redeem individual existence through its narrative representation.

The choice of biography expands the field of comparison between Yourcenar and Sartre – himself a biographer of Flaubert, Genet and Baudelaire. Indeed, for him, too, the authenticity of the biographical subject can only be done justice if the biographical project is itself authentic. As Ann Jefferson has pointed out, for Sartre, biography is "positioned

as the key element in tipping the balance” between redeeming authenticity for the chosen subject or failing to do so. An inauthentic biography would “turn existence into the essence that is character and the consecrated course of predestination,” while in its authentic version, “biography validates literature as a project” (Jefferson 187). In other words, for Sartre, an inauthentic life narrative would aim to essentialize life, while authentic biography would not only demonstrate the authenticity of the subject’s life-project, but also redeem literary narrative as creative representation of life.

Authentic biography understood in this sense is a major concern in Sartre’s most influential novel, *La Nausée*. Roquentin’s main business in the town of Bouville is to write a biography of the fictional marquis de Rollebon. Roquentin’s frustration is similar to that of Hadrien:

Ce ne sont pas les documents qui font défaut : lettres, fragments de mémoires, rapports secrets, archives de police. J’en ai presque trop, au contraire. Ce qui manque dans tous ces témoignages, c’est la fermeté, la consistance. Ils ne se contredisent pas, non, mais ils ne s’accordent pas non plus ; ils n’ont pas l’air de concerner *la même personne*. (*La Nausée* 29, my emphasis)

The lack of coherence haunts Roquentin as much as it haunts Hadrien. Both characters are at a loss to discern the presence of a ‘person’. The failure of the self is associated with the impossibility of a narrative that unifies the past – both personal and historical. Roquentin wonders how historians manage to put together the evidence that they gather in order to form coherent narratives. Like Hadrien, he suspects that it is the mind that projects a unifying order onto this evidence:

Ce sont *des hypothèses honnêtes* et qui rendent compte des faits : mais je sens si bien qu’elles viennent de moi, qu’elles sont tout simplement une manière d’unifier mes connaissances. Pas une lueur ne vient du côté de Rollebon. Lents, paresseux, maussades, les faits s’accommodent à la rigueur de l’ordre que je veux leur donner mais il leur reste extérieur. (Ibid. 30, my emphasis)

The fictional premise of *La Nausée* allows Sartre to ask a very similar question to that of Yourcenar, namely, how a narrative can be developed that accounts for Europe’s historical past in such a way as to do justice to individual experience. For both Yourcenar and Sartre, the question of historiography is enmeshed with that of modern subjectivity, in the sense that the individual mind has lost its metaphysical bearings and has to translate this loss into an opportunity. The loss, for both authors, is the untenability of what Sartre ironically calls “des hypothèses honnêtes”, and Yourcenar calls “ce plan tout factice”. These expressions designate exactly the same thing, namely, the ‘inauthentic’ accounts of history and individual experience due to the delegitimization of conventional humanist narratives. Yourcenar reaches this conclusion drawing on the legacy of classical Western European thought; Sartre arrives at the same place using the critical tools afforded by phenomenology (no less a part of the same tradition). Both authors discern the opportunity for a new narrative at the limits of humanism, which revolves around the notion of authenticity. This aspires to be the non-essentialist narrative of life whose truth does not follow the principle of adequacy to a pre-existing model, but that of the self-production of humanist value in time. We can see how, in *La Nausée*, the project of self-realization leads to the abandonment of the historiographical ambition (Roquentin chooses to write a novel instead of a historical biography), whereas in *Mémoires*, Hadrien’s project entails a kind of existential historiography (the history of Rome). The difference between Yourcenar and Sartre lies in the former’s implicit claim that her novel constitutes the authentic narrative that will corroborate the possibility of authentic life and the comprehensibility of history. In the last chapter of *Mémoires*, this claim is clearly articulated at an existential level, when Hadrien states: “l’aventure de mon existence prend un sens, s’organise comme dans un

poème" (500). This is strongly remindful of Roquentin's dream to live life as a work of art; a dream which, at the end of *La Nausée*, remains hanging as a futural promise. Antoine Compagnon speculated that, in *La Nausée*, "L'existence serait sauvée par le romanesque" (Compagnon 96); for its part, *Mémoires d'Hadrien* not only purports to have saved its protagonist, but also argues for the continuing relevance of European humanist thought after the war.

In the following paragraphs, I will elucidate Yourcenar's perception of authenticity with reference to Sartre's analysis of that concept. In doing so, my aim is to show that, despite received opinion and her own self-assessment, Yourcenar's thinking of identity and difference is conversant with the broader cultural and philosophical debates in France at the time. There is a long philosophical tradition about authenticity that also includes Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and, more relevantly, Heidegger, before Sartre. As Jason Golomb explains, for Sartre, "authenticity does not imply the self-referential 'ownness' of the self, as it does for Heidegger, but refers to a creative process which produces transcendent contents (including our own selves) [...]" (Golomb 133). Indeed, for Sartre, authenticity is not a state to be reached by means of the inward search of the self, but a process of creative engagement with the outside world through which unique forms of subjectivity are being produced. Rather than a mark of self-identity, authenticity is a commitment to difference. In *L'Être et le néant*, Sartre suggests that human consciousness exists in difference from the world, in that it perceives it negatively as other than itself.<sup>2</sup> Negation at a phenomenological level causes anxiety at an existential level, to which authentic or inauthentic responses are possible. Sartre has analyzed numerous practical examples of inauthenticity that refer to the essentialization of social roles, racial characteristics and sexual preferences. Conversely, authentic existential responses consist in recognizing and accepting the difference between the self and the world. In this sense, for Sartre, authenticity does not entail the restoration of individual identity, but the acceptance of the self's differential character.

A complex dialectic of authenticity was proposed by Sartre in *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1945), his essay on anti-Semitism in France. Sartre argues that centuries of misfortune have left the French Jews in a state of existential abandonment. From their point of view, the world is perceived negatively as a series of adversities, while Jewishness itself is a forced representation that cannot be circumvented. According to Sartre, this is a situation that a Jewish person must anticipate and accept, rather than attempt to escape from: "L'authenticité, pour lui, [le Juif] c'est de vivre *jusqu'au bout* sa condition de Juif, l'inauthenticité de la nier ou de tenter de l'esquiver" (*Réflexions* 110, my emphasis). This "jusqu'au bout" designates a third movement beyond negation and acceptance, whereby a Jewish person transcends 'Jewishness' and emerges on the far side of it as human rather than as a representation. Sartre specifies that "le Juif authentique [...] est ce qu'il se fait [...] Il se retrouve dans son délaissement consenti, un homme, tout un homme, avec les horizons métaphysiques que comporte la condition humaine" (167). It is thus intimated that, for Sartre, humanity is the horizon of authenticity. The 'Jew' arrives at a state of pure existence, a human being that has risen above the sin of existing as a representation: "[le] péché d'être Juif" (132).

The notion of authenticity as a constant negotiation between identity and difference is equally central to Yourcenar. For her, too, authenticity begins by accepting difference in response to the situation one finds oneself in. In the novel, authenticity is pursued at both the level of personal existence and that of history. That Hadrien, like Sartre's authentic Jew, assumes his role as emperor and emerges out of it as "un homme, tout un homme" is

2 This argument is repeatedly made in *L'Être et le néant*. By way of example, Sartre claims that "[La conscience] est pure et simple négation du donné, elle existe comme dégagement d'un certain donné existant et comme engagement vers une certaine fin encore non-existante" (558).

evident in the novel when he equates his moment of imperial omnipotence with his humanity: “j’étais dieu, tout simplement, parce que j’étais homme” (399). The essential quality of being a god/emperor is diluted into the differential quality of being human. Immediately preceding this statement is a syllogism about the corporeality and vulnerability of the human condition and about the ascetics, including Epictetus, who resist bodily needs and natural change. Hadrien rejects the pursuit of purity and invests in difference: “j’étais [...] l’un des aspects de cette force unique engagée dans la multiplicité des choses, aigle et taureau, homme et cygne, phallus et cerveau toute ensemble, Protée qui est en même temps Jupiter” (398-399). Being authentic, for Yourcenar, means being aware of the multiplicity of things and actively engaging with time, nature and the body. The following statements, in which Hadrien analyses his creative impulse as commissioner of numerous buildings and sponsor of artworks, suggest that creating is not an act of genesis (which would entail the ambition of identity beyond space and time) but one of mimesis (which suggests difference embedded in space and time):

Construire, c’est collaborer avec la terre : c’est mettre une marque humaine sur un paysage qui en sera modifié à jamais ; c’est contribuer aussi à ce lent changement qui est la vie des villes.

J’ai beaucoup reconstruit : c’est collaborer avec le temps sous son aspect du passé, en saisir ou en modifier l’esprit, lui servir de relais vers un plus long avenir ; c’est retrouver sous les pierres le secret des sources. (Both quotations, 384)

The point of these statements is that the model of creativity is not theistic but humanistic in character. Authentic creation involves an acceptance of the limits posed to humans by the *hic et nunc* of their existence, their spatio-temporal situation. In principle, then, Yourcenar’s understanding of *construire* in terms of collaboration and reconstruction is aligned with Sartre’s analysis of the embeddedness of the self within the situation that surrounds it. The important difference is that, for Sartre, the relationship between the self and the situation is one of negation and existential angst. Much of *L’Être et le néant* is about exploring and deploring the lack of identity between subjective circumstances and objective situations, and little is to be found there as to how to pragmatically manage this problem. Yourcenar’s solution involves a typical gesture of acceptance, which, in the case of Hadrien translates into an aesthetic-political management of the difference between human intentions and factual situations. An illustration of that is when Hadrien reflects on his choice of building materials for the architectural works that he commissions. This is preceded by a moment of quasi-Sartrean negation and angst, when he realizes that his creations will not last forever. Then there is the pragmatic moment of acceptance and action. These creations do not exist ‘essentially’, they rather exist temporally:

À Rome, j’utilisais de préférence la brique éternelle, qui ne retourne que très lentement à la terre dont elle est née, et dont le tassement, ou l’effritement imperceptible, se fait de telle manière que l’édifice reste montagne alors même qu’il a cessé d’être visiblement une forteresse, un cirque, ou une tombe. En Grèce, en Asie, j’employais le marbre natal, la belle substance qui une fois taillée demeure fidèle à la mesure humaine, si bien que le plan du temple tout entier reste contenu dans chaque fragment de tambour brisé. (385)

The impulse to create something that lasts forever is followed by the ironic knowledge of demise in time. For Hadrien, the moment of authenticity is that of the practical management of demise so that the resistance of things is predicted and provided for. The existentialist dimension of this statement is revealed in one of the final paragraphs of the novel, when Hadrien likens himself to old buildings which retain signs of their original architecture even when they fall apart. He then concludes: “je suis ce que j’étais; je meurs sans changer”

(511). This is meant as a paradoxical statement, in that it reads like an affirmation of the ontological stability of being human, but is in fact an acknowledgement of the inevitability of contingency and fragmentation, and of the specifically human ability to cope with them.

In these meditations, authenticity emerges as a special possibility of the self. Drawing again on Sartre's phenomenology, this possibility is a structural characteristic of consciousness and constitutes its fundamental freedom. Consciousness is free because it never coincides with itself and thus resists any attempts to essentialize it. Yourcenar was undoubtedly familiar with Sartre's philosophy of freedom (*L'Être et le néant* figures among the holdings of her personal library).<sup>3</sup> Although the concepts of freedom and choice are not generally important in her thought, she employs them in one of the oft-quoted extracts of *Mémoires*. This is in the context of Hadrien's discussion of his moral education as a young man:

Ce qui m'intéressait n'était pas une philosophie de l'homme libre (tous ceux qui s'y essayent m'ennuyèrent) mais une technique ; je voulais trouver la charnière où notre volonté s'articule au destin, où la discipline seconde, au lieu de la freiner, la nature. (318)

In line with Yourcenar's lack of appreciation for philosophical abstraction, this phrase juxtaposes a philosophy of freedom with the more practical idea of a technique of good life. For her, the meaning of freedom is in going along, collaborating with our objective surroundings. This can be read as a direct criticism of Sartre, for whom the relationship between humans and their surroundings is fundamentally antagonistic, allowing for the emergence of freedom as rebellion. For Sartre, freedom is an ontologically negative *a priori*, a given state in which consciousness exists non-essentially as different from itself. It is in that sense that Sartre sees freedom as a condemnation. In *L'Être et le néant*, he famously states: "l'homme, étant condamné à être libre, porte le poids du monde tout entier sur ses épaules" (639). Yourcenar picks precisely on the paradox of freedom as condemnation, in her letter to Dimaras, which I quoted in the introduction, in which she criticizes existentialism for preserving the notion of sin, but without the possibility of grace. Writing about Sartre, Julia Kristeva makes a very similar point: "la liberté n'est pas une grâce, ni un bien, nous sommes condamnés à elle [...] La liberté est antibien, antinature, antiphysis" (Kristeva 334). For Sartre, freedom is fundamentally against nature. In his play *Les Mouches*, he expresses this negativity in unambiguous terms: "Mais tout à coup, la liberté a fondu sur moi et m'a transi, la nature a sauté en arrière. [...] Étranger à moi-même, je sais. Hors nature, contre nature, sans excuse, sans autre recours qu'en moi" (*Les Mouches*, 236-237). Sartre's understanding of freedom as necessary negation of nature is untenable for Hadrien:

Comprends bien qu'il ne s'agit pas ici [...] de je ne sais quel choix ou quel refus abstrait, qui insulte aux conditions de notre monde plein, continu, formé d'objets et de corps. J'ai rêvé d'un plus secret acquiescement ou d'une plus souple bonne volonté. (318)

The contrast between Yourcenar's and Sartre's accounts is all the sharper because the two thinkers share certain important critical terms and concerns. Like Sartre, Yourcenar focuses on the metaphysics of the relationship between individuals and the world and points conclusively at the distance that separates them. Also like him, though less directly, she sees this distance, this 'hiatus', as what enables humans to make choices which can be authentic (because they acknowledge distance) or inauthentic (because they don't). For both thinkers, authentic choices involve taking action in factual situations, so that the humanity of the self is ultimately done justice. Nevertheless, there is also incompatibility

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3 See Bernier, *Inventaire de la bibliothèque de Marguerite Yourcenar*.



between their two accounts and it lies in a deeper, perhaps psychologically conditioned way of understanding identity and difference. Sartre, at least at that stage of his thought, sees the metaphysics of the self mostly from the point of view of the 'for-itself', the wanting consciousness, and is most sensitive to the state of separation and longing that informs the humans' relationship with the world. For him, every individual is an unfeasible project to appropriate the world as a totality of 'being-in-itself'. Therefore, the fundamental human experience is that of difference and the original form of action is revolt. On the contrary, Yourcenar tends to see human reality mostly from the point of view of the 'in-itself', that is, self-sufficient nature and the body. Over and above the experience of difference, she perceives an identity which is continuous, pragmatic and objective and does not fully lend itself to conceptualization. However acute the awareness of difference is, and in late modernity this awareness is probably at its acutest, authentic responses involve a discreet acceptance, "un plus secret acquiescement", as per the quotation above. The primacy of identity over difference is also indicated in other writings of that period, as when she commends Cavafy's poetry because, in it, "la révolte [...] se place à l'intérieur de l'acquiescement" ("Présentation critique de Constantin Cavafy", 156).

Yourcenar's commitment to the idea of an almost cosmic identity that precedes difference explains the relative apathy of the progressive French intelligentsia of her time towards her work and has triggered vehement critical reactions outside of France, especially in the 1990's. From the vantage point of the post-structural thinking of ethics and difference, her narratives have seemed not only outmoded but downright suspect. In Yourcenar's early writings, Erin G. Carlston traced the presence of an "ethnocentric and ultimately racist concept of European culture that also subtends certain fascist ideologies" (Carlston 134). Elaine Marks castigated Yourcenar's "antisemitism, racism, classism" in her novella *Coup de grâce* (Marks 86). The most powerful statement remains Davis's deconstruction of the grand humanist narrative of *Mémoires d'Hadrien*, to which I referred above. All of these criticisms are based on methodologically similar approaches, namely, a critique of the ways that racial, ethnic, social, sexual, or gender identity is represented in the text. In particular, Davis examines representations of women, Barbarians and Jews in *Mémoires*, and points to "the radical fragility of an epistemological position which rests on secure distinctions between surface and depth, accident and essence, authentic and inauthentic, dissimulation and truth, male and female" (Davis 128).

Yet it is not so certain that the theoretical coherence of Yourcenar's text relies on such clear-cut distinctions. To be sure, the representational content of the narrative is susceptible to criticism, and there is still more ammunition in favor of post-structural orthodoxy: In addition to Jews, barbarians and women, there is the narrative of the doomed love affair of Hadrien and Antinoüs. After the death of Antinoüs – a likely suicide – Hadrien begins to compulsively commission statues reproducing the dead lover's face and body, and demands that Antinoüs is deified by the population. "Je réclamaï un fini parfait, une perfection pure, ce dieu qu'est pour ceux qui l'ont aimé tout être mort à vingt ans [...]" (389). The denial of death and the deification of the object of desire are exemplary postures of inauthenticity, according to the novel's own standards. It is of course necessary to condemn the emperor's ethical stance as it constitutes a quasi-orientalist display of imperial dominance. However, is that all there is to say about Hadrien's failure? Is it not also important to acknowledge that Yourcenar precisely chooses to stage this failure so that its true ethical dimensions become evident? While Hadrien fails to recognize otherness, the text asks us to question 'his' version of authenticity as a viable alternative to imperial/patriarchal/metaphysical essence and as a key concept enabling the existential revision of humanism. In this way, what is at stake in the novel is not (or not only) the representation of identity as such but the staging of the confrontation between the humanist idea and its ethical, historical and existential implications.

Still, Davis and the rest of Yourcenar's critics are right to think of the Jews. This is because the Jewish rebellion during Hadrien's rule is presented as the ultimate challenge to his political project. In telling the story of Hadrien's attempt to unify the Empire under the sign of a Greek-inspired universalism, the novel narratively represents the Western presumption of the absolute intelligibility of the voice of the other. For example, this is how a meeting is described between Hadrien and one of the Jewish leaders, rabbi Akiba, of whom it is clearly mentioned that he did not speak Greek (i.e. the *lingua franca* of humanism).

Assisté par des interprètes, j'eus avec lui plusieurs entretiens, qui ne furent de sa part qu'un prétexte au monologue. En moins d'une heure, je me sentis capable de définir exactement sa pensée, sinon d'y souscrire ; il ne fit pas le même effort en ce qui concernait la mienne. Ce fanatique ne se doutait même pas qu'on pût raisonner sur d'autres prémisses que les siennes. [...] L'ignorance d'Akiba, son refus d'accepter tout ce qui n'était pas ses livres saints et son peuple, lui conféraient une sorte d'étroite innocence. (435, my emphasis)

Even more important than the negative representation of Jews as fanatics, (which may be justified as part of the verisimilitude of the narrative, since this is how Hadrien sees them) is how Yourcenar registers the crash of cosmopolitan open-mindedness as it encounters a discourse that is wholly incompatible with it. Hadrien pre-empts the total translatability of the other's voice, is quick to reduce the unfamiliar to the familiar, and justifies his rejection of the rabbi by evoking the primacy of difference, that is, humanism's dearest virtue. Indeed, the break-down of negotiation is attributed to the rabbi's failure to understand that difference must be accepted ("son refus d'accepter"), and therefore to his non-adherence to the principle of authenticity.

What is more, Yourcenar contrasts Hadrien's Greek-inspired aesthetic project to build a new Jerusalem in the image of Rome with the non-aesthetic - textual rather than visual - character of the Jewish tradition. Hadrien is at a loss to understand why "ces déshérités préféraient leurs ruines à une grande ville où s'offriraient toutes les aubaines du gain, du savoir et du plaisir" (430). This issue refers to the ancient Jewish prohibition of the representation of God. However, within the dynamics of the novel, the question of representation is always enmeshed with the question of authenticity. As we discussed in the first part of this article, the criterion of authenticity for Yourcenar and a key element of the existential question of *Mémoires* is the ability to give life a narrative form. Extrapolating this to the level of the Empire, Hadrien's project is to give aesthetic form to that which is originally shapeless:

J'entrevois la possibilité d'helléniser les barbares, d'atticiser Rome, d'imposer doucement au monde la seule culture qui se soit un jour séparée du monstrueux, de l'informe, de l'immobile, qui ait inventé une définition de la méthode, une théorie de la politique et de la beauté. (344)

The aestheticization of politics has been famously associated by Walter Benjamin with fascism, which is yet another sign of how shaky the ground is on which Yourcenar has her character tread (Benjamin 252). Rather than tag the label of 'fascist' upon her, I would refer to Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's study *La fiction du politique*, where he associates the political philosophy that Western Europe has inherited from Greece through Rome with the process of aesthetic molding of nation-states in the nineteenth century, and argues that fascism is not the denial of that process but its historical outcome. For Lacoue-Labarthe, there is something inherently essentialist in Europe's historical attempts to form political subjectivities like works of art, through processes of mythologizing that refer back to the Greek *polis*. Responding to the revelation, in the 1980's, of the extent of Heidegger's endorsement of the Nazi regime, Lacoue-Labarthe claims that even the boldest attempts at

deconstructing Western political philosophy have failed to recognize this reality. With regard to the extermination that took place in the Nazi concentration camps, Lacoue-Labarthe argues that the “Jews” represent that part of Western tradition that never subscribed to that mythologizing project. Quoting Maurice Blanchot, he comments as follows:

Maurice Blanchot a raison d’écrire que “les juifs incarnent (...) le rejet des mythes, le renoncement aux idoles, la reconnaissance d’un ordre éthique qui se manifeste par le respect de la loi. Dans le juif, dans le ‘mythe du juif’, ce que veut anéantir Hitler c’est précisément l’homme libéré des mythes”. [...] C’est un ‘peuple’ informe, inesthétique, qui par définition ne peut entrer dans le procès de l’auto-fictionnement et ne peut pas faire un sujet. (Lacoue-Labarthe 81-82)

It is important to remember that these assessments are not about the Jewish people but about the fiction of the Jews from the vantage point of the West. We could follow Lyotard here, who also refers to Lacoue-Labarthe’s study, but writes “les juifs” in quotation marks and with a small ‘j’, in order to distinguish between the idea and the actual people (Lyotard 13). As far as Yourcenar’s novel is concerned, the point is that it properly acknowledges the aesthetic-political character of the European project and it readily associates it with the Greco-Roman tradition and its modern humanist evolution; it also recognizes that at the heart of this project is the principle of acceptance of difference and the need to open up to the other; then, it tests the limits of its competence in recognizing otherness, and concedes failure. This pattern also applies at the level of individual life. In tune with the existentialist inquiry of its time, *Mémoires d’Hadrien* anchors the question of individual authenticity on the possibility of narrative representation. In sum, just as the self can be molded as a work of art, so the empire can be built following an aesthetic model. In both cases, the existential and the historical, the humanist principle of authenticity as collaboration and reconstruction (rather than authoritarianism or divine demiurgy) is employed. What seemed initially shapeless thus acquires form. By refusing to subscribe to that longing - by appearing “monstrueux”, “informes”, in Yourcenar’s account, or “inesthétique[s]”, “informe[s]”, in Lacoue-Labarthe’s account - the Jews do not only halt Hadrien’s imperial project, they also question his existential project to narrate his life and thus to confirm his authenticity.

These conflicts are played out in the novel with narrative precision. For that reason, there is more to be gained by reading *Mémoires d’Hadrien* for its scope, complexity and exactitude in presenting the critical issues that inform it, than by treating it as an ideological statement that raises ethical eyebrows. One should first try to understand the reciprocal play between identity and difference that animates Yourcenar’s narratives before setting off to critically demolish them. While I have tried to carry out the task of understanding, using Sartre’s work as an external conceptual angle, I should also point out that Yourcenar’s work also sheds light on *his* philosophy and literature, since he also used both the Jewish example and the metaphor of the work of art to develop his concept of authenticity. As I discussed above, for Sartre, the “authentic Jew” is he who accepts his embeddedness in the given historical situation, acknowledges the socio-cultural over-determination of “Jewishness” and breaks through it in order to reclaim his humanity as “délaissement”, abandonment. The strength of Sartre’s thesis is in analyzing the human condition from the point of view of that abandonment. However, he has little to say about the action that needs to be taken so that an individual’s humanity can be redeemed. This is precisely where Yourcenar’s project of authenticity comes in, investing on this abandonment as the raw material for aesthetic and political action. The problem is that, in extrapolating from the personal to the political and from the existential to the historical, Yourcenar’s narrative transforms abandonment into something all-inclusive and universal, an abandonment that fails to cater for the truly abandoned, i.e. the barbarians, women, “les juifs”, and Antinous. Thus, while it is not correct to say that *Mémoires d’Hadrien*

constitutes an ethical failure, it certainly narrates a philosophical one. It narrates the failure to go sufficiently far in deconstructing one of Western Europe's most enduring fantasies, the fantasy of universal humanism.

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